

Anthós Journal (1990-1996)

Volume 1 | Number 5

Article 5

1996

Plato's Phaedo

Adam Coberley
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Coberley, Adam (1996) "Plato's Phaedo," *Anthós Journal (1990-1996)*: Vol. 1: No. 5, Article 5.
Available at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss5/5

This open access Article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](#). All documents in PDXScholar should meet [accessibility standards](#). If we can make this document more accessible to you, [contact our team](#).

Plato's *Phaedo*

Adam Coberley

Plato's *Phaedo* is a work in which five complex language forms are used in an intertwining manner in order to form complex ideas. These five language forms are responsible for creating everything that comes out of the *Phaedo* and are responsible for the formation of any ideas that the reader might make. These forms, narrative frame, periods of debate and interlocution, long speeches, mythopoeisis, and allusions to the cultural corpus join together in order to form the *Phaedo*.

The narrative frame of the work begins twisting a complicated web that operates on three different levels. The first two levels are developed by Plato when he begins to play with the two separate dialogues that take place. The internal dialogue between Socrates, Phaedo, Simmias, and Cebes is framed by the external dialogue, or the dialogue between Phaedo and Echocrates. Therefore, the two levels that develop from the beginning are the levels of Echocrates' inquiry of Phaedo to tell him of Socrates' last day and the actual dialogue that took place on Socrates' last day. The third level takes a little more reading into the culture of the people of this time period, and it will be discussed in greater detail in the cultural corpus section. However, this is a good example of a Platonic Dialogue with an explicit frame.

The explicit frame is used to set the dialogue into motion. It places all of the characters in Socrates' room on his final day, by forming an external dialogue to go along with the internal dialogue. As a matter of fact, it makes the dialogue a lot more complex than it would be with an internal frame. The language form of speeches comes into play here. Plato loved to play with the

idea of speech making. We have seen, in the *Phaedrus*, and many other of the Platonic Dialogues, that speech making is not as simple as it seems on the surface. When a person is reciting someone else's words, they are in fact becoming the person that they are speaking for. For example, Phaedrus recites Lysias's speech, and it was therefore concluded that it was actually Lysias speaking through Phaedrus' body. They considered him possessed with the original speaker's speech, and the original speaker was taking him over and making a speech through his body. It can be shown, with further reference to the *Phaedrus*, that Socrates was also capable of this possession through the speeches he made about love. He said that Phaedrus, who was compelled by Lysias, was compelling him to make his speeches and it was Phaedrus's fault that he might have offended the god of love. I use this example to support the following argument: the dialogue operating in the *Phaedo* is doing the same thing. We can add another person to our list of people that have been "possessed." Phaedo is "possessed" by what he has learned from Socrates' speeches. The dialogue within a dialogue operating in the *Phaedo* is actually showing that through speech making, Phaedo is keeping the words of Socrates alive. He is becoming Socrates in the external dialogue by retelling what Socrates and the others said that day. He is therefore keeping Socrates alive. The external speech made by Phaedo, is what I think the people of this time would consider the equivalent of Socrates making the speeches himself.

There is another example of parallelism that takes a two level approach to speech making. The people of this time period put great emphasis on two classes. The formation of the Erastes and Eromenos seemed to be a very interesting thing that Plato liked to manipulate. He does so in this dialogue in the following way: the internal dialogue shows Phaedo as an inferior to Socrates,

because he is learning what Socrates is teaching him about life after death. Then, through the retelling of Socrates account, he is seen as the teacher and superior to Echocrates. This puts an interesting twist on the ideas formed by the Erastes and Eromenos classes. In the internal dialogue Phaedo is seen as the submissive male, but through the retelling of Socrates' speeches and his wisdom Phaedo becomes the dominant male.

The last type of speech making that occurs operates in a different manner. It is just there to remind the reader to keep thinking on two different levels. These types of speeches are what I like to characterize as frame breaks. They serve as a transition between the external and internal dialogues throughout the work for quick intervals. One of the first frame breaks occurs when Echocrates states that he likes a certain part of the story. This is used to break the listener from the confusion and tension going on at the time. This same method is used with another kind of phrase. It was almost like a "what happened next" expression. Echocrates interrupts Phaedo to show his interest, and urge him on. He acts like he can not wait to hear what is going to happen next. The other kind of frame break is like the break that appears between lines 88 and 89. It seems as though Plato uses breaks like these to allow the reader to stop in the middle of a confusing passage and sort things out. It also makes the reader stop and remember the big picture.

Periods of debate and interlocution usually come before these big speeches that Socrates, Simmias, and Cebes make. They are used to apply traditional ideas to an abstract thought and prove it to be seemingly true. These are seen throughout the play in order to develop ideas of unexplainable things like the soul, afterlife, and pain versus pleasure. Simmias and Cebes use this technique also, in order to dispute Socrates. A good example of this occurs after line 87c. The method of debate and inter-

locution is used to develop the idea of the soul. The tailor maker and his jackets are seen as the soul, and they are being compared to the soul that wears out the body. This is the traditional idea of the tailor making coats trying to be manipulated to explain a non-traditional or unexplainable thing, the soul.

Mythopoesis is viewed by Socrates as a bad thing. He argues that a person should get away from the old classical form. Mythopoesis is not consistent with the philosophical quest, and Socrates says that a good philosopher would not use the means of myth telling to make a point. However, mythopoesis is seen near the end of the dialogue, and Socrates is the one using it. He has his back up against the wall, and he does not even really know what the afterlife is going to be like. He uses Aeschylus' myth to help convince his listeners that he really knows what he is talking about; this is very hypocritical of Socrates. He expects these people to believe him after saying that a good philosopher would keep away from these forms. He is trying to stage manage his own death, and his use of mythopoesis here does not do a good job of convincing his audience. He thinks that he has Simmias, Phaedo, and Cebes believing him, but they are only agreeing with him out of the pity that came from thinking that it was his last day. Socrates is trying to show that this is going to be a good thing for him, and he is trying to convince his audience. The reader sees just how convinced the audience really was when they start crying after he drinks the hemlock. Socrates tries to stop them, but he goes out knowing that his speeches of that day and his past teachings about the soul and the afterlife have accomplished little.

The third level of parallelism is showing the reflections of things going on in the time period. These allusions to the cultural corpus are shown in a variety of different ways, and it goes on to show how Plato felt about Socrates. This later becomes a

big problem for readers. I am not sure weather to think of Socrates as a good person or a bad person, but I know what is meant by the Socratic Problem. The first, is the way in which Plato sticks to the Homeric and Epic tradition that was valued so much in this time period. He does this in a variety of ways.

He first uses the epic style by formulating parts of his writing that way. The first part of the external dialogue starts with a list of people who were at Socrates' death bed. This is very much like the same kind of Epic Catalogues seen in the *Iliad*. However, it was used to arrive at a bigger conclusion. It showed the irony of who was there, Simmias and Cebes, and who was not there, Plato himself.

The irony of who was and was not there goes on to produce *agon*, a very popular topic in epic poetry, but this *agon* operates on many different levels. The first *agon* is on the level of the internal dialogue. In all of his dialogues, Socrates lets his discussion die down to a small group of elite people. This is also seen in the *Symposium*. He did not like to waste his time with unimportant people. However, composition of the group created *agon* within it. Simmias and Cebes were Thebans and were considered illegal aliens in the setting of this dialogue, Athens. They were rivals to Athenians, and that is why they were chosen to oppose Socrates.

The next kind of *agon* was an *agon* with words. Socrates bashes natural science on line 96 by saying eating more does not always make a person bigger. He also bashes physical sciences by saying "movement is based on bones, sinews that relax and contract, joints, and the skin..." he then goes on to question how people that think this way can explain sight and sound. Socrates says that philosophy is the only way to have a pure soul. His arguments for philosophy and against the above mentioned sciences is the way in which *agon* with words is portrayed.

There is also an *agon* that appears between what is seen as being done for the public good versus what is being done for personal gain. Things that Socrates says are for the public good usually have some kind of gain for Socrates. It was aristocrats, like him, that got to decide what public good really was, and Socrates was working things to his advantage all of the time. This is easily backed up with the evidence that Socrates really wanted to die. He mocked the Athenian courts that were trying to be lenient, and he refused many offers, during the Delos Boat Festival, to escape from imprisonment. Executions at this time were not a popular thing to do, because everyone in a Greek city-state was seen as family. An execution had the connotation of executing a family member, and therefore, everyone was trying to give Socrates a way out. Socrates, although given many outs, goes through with the execution. He says it is for public good, but the truth is that he never liked life in this corporeal world. His teachings show that leaving the world of the body and moving on to the world of the soul were his wishes.

The last type of *agon* is detected when Socrates starts doing things that people of this time period would not do. He breaks many traditions and mocks others in order to stage manage his death. The *agon* occurs between keeping the traditions or dying as he wishes.

Socrates is constantly breaking traditions in this work. He kicked his family out on his last day, and spent time with an elite group of people. Athenians that cherish family values would frown on this, but it is the way that Socrates wanted to die. He also wanted to pour a libation from his poison cup. I think he was doing this to mock a tradition. I do not think that the right way to perform a libation is to pour poison on the ground. He does this to lighten the situation and hopefully make everyone think that he believes that he is going on to a better place. Also,

his last words, "Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget it..." are out of place. They have two different connotations. One is the connotation that he is being healed. A cock was offered to a healer as a tradition in those times. He is saying that being released from his body is healing him. However he is mocking this tradition by using a different connotation. There is an unwanted erection that sometimes results from the hemlock, and he may be referring to that.

All of the five language forms in this work are responsible for every idea that comes out of the work. Whether it is something as simple as the narrative frame making complexities, or the allusions to the cultural corpus making parallelism stand out, they all form what we know as the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* is a work in which the language forms of narrative frame, speech making, question and answer debating, mythopoeisis, and allusions to the cultural corpus all work together in order to form all of the dialogue's multifarious ideas.

Bibliography

The Columbia Encyclopedia 5th ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press c1993.

Phaedrus, Plato, (Walter Hamilton Translation), Great Britain, c1973.

Symposium, Plato, (Walter Hamilton Translation), England, c1951.